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## Valiant Consequences

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## Valiant Consequences

### Abstract

War and conflict are significant events that hold a reasonable possibility to alter countries and their cultural populations. These transforming effects can come in many forms, ranging from mental trauma to the abandonment or modification of culture and its ideals. In this illustration, perhaps no group has endured the same everlasting detrimental effects as the Native Americans and their underlying consequences stemming from World War 2. These detriments can be seen in the form of erratic drunken or violent behavior and forgotten traditions. On the contrary, these effects may have at one time been diminished and replaced by the gratitude of their perceived former oppressor. In her work *Ceremony*, Indigenous author Leslie Marmon Silko has displayed these differentiating effects. Thus the goal is to outline the varying effects of war on the Native American culture and individuals in *Ceremony*.

### Keywords

Native American, War, Native American Literature, Silko Ceremony

### Disciplines

American Literature | Indigenous Studies | Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority | Peace and Conflict Studies

### Comments

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### Valiant Consequences

War and conflict are significant events that hold a reasonable possibility to alter countries and their cultural populations. These transforming effects can come in many forms, ranging from mental trauma to the abandonment or modification of culture and its ideals. In this illustration, perhaps no group has endured the same everlasting detrimental effects as the Native Americans and their underlying consequences stemming from World War 2. These detriments can be seen in the form of erratic drunken or violent behavior and forgotten traditions. On the contrary, these effects may have at one time been diminished and replaced by the gratitude of their perceived former oppressor. In her work *Ceremony*, Indigenous author Leslie Marmon Silko has displayed these differentiating effects. Thus the goal is to outline the varying effects of war on the Native American culture and individuals in *Ceremony*.

The narrative of mental trauma resulting from combat experience holds a significant illustration of the effects of war on Native individuals in *Ceremony*. This trauma consequently induces habitual practices of alcoholism, “swinging”, and other irrational dangerous behavior displayed in numerous instances. As Silko incites, "Reports note that since the Second World War a pattern of drinking and violence not previously seen before, is emerging among Indian

veterans" (Silko 53). Correspondingly, PTSD or "battle fatigue" is the circumstantial underlying reason for these addictive and destructive behaviors. However, the diagnosis or acknowledgment of such a mental disorder is extremely taboo for the period. Henceforth, the origins of the mysterious "fatigue" are deduced to arising from the harsh nature of war coupled with the environmental circumstances that brought various diseases to the Pacific Gulf islands, as Silko incites, "They called it battle fatigue, and they said hallucinations were common with malarial fever" (Silko 8). Moreover, the damaging cognitive effects of this sickness can be seen in numerous instances, especially from the perspective of Tayo.

Silko, in this regard, depicts the terrifying hallucinations that accompany Indigenous combat veterans, illustrating Tayo's mental demons, including the efforts he puts forth to diminish such miseries, even limiting his sleep to avoid these terrifying nightmares. To this point, Silko states, "He had to keep moving so that the sinews connected behind his eyes did not slip loose and sin his eyes to the interior of his skull where the scenes waited for him" (8). However, as previously remarked, although a medical diagnosis was possible in this period, the sickness and its origin were still viewed as very taboo and ambiguous. Thus, the characterization of this ambiguity can be observed through the effects of the confusion in Tayo's family concerning his newly discovered disorder, as Silko remarks, "But his advantage was the army doctors who told her and Robert that the cause of battle fatigue was a mystery, even to them" (31). This confusion results in Tayo's family largely avoiding his presence and even modifying their mannerism to avoid and or accommodate him, to which Silko incites, "In the beginning old Grandma and Robry stayed away from him, except to say 'Good morning' or 'Goodnight'; the

sickness and his crying overwhelmed them" (31). Evidently, the horrors of war bore to the emergence and diagnosis of "battle fatigue" in Indigenous culture, which can be characterized by mystery and extreme mental strain, resulting in the "fatigue's" detrimental effects becoming endless possibilities.

The portrayal of rampant alcoholism among Indigenous veterans substantially represents the effects of war in *Ceremony*. This uncontrolled alcoholic indulgence is owed to the trauma-affected Indigenous veterans attempting to self-medicate despite such criticism from elders. As Silko remarks, "It was something the old people could not understand. Liquor was medicine for the anger that made them hurt, for the pain of the loss, medicine for tight bellies and choked up throats" (40). Tayo portrays these various bars frequented by the Indigenous veterans as extremely filthy, to which he indicates, "The bar didn't change; whatever the color of the walls, they were always dirty, dark grime of stale beer and cigarette smoke; it always smelled the same too, a lingering odor of urine and vomit" (49). However, this drunkard conduct was not always the precedent, as the war brought enormous transformation to the generation that fought it. Hence, a recurring notion in the text is the substantial and often adverse change that the conflict brought to individuals. For example, Harley is represented as a sloppy drunk which ultimately leads to his demise. However, Harley, prior to the war, was not a drinker at all, as Silko states, "He Laughed, and Tayo smiled because Harley didn't use to like beer at all, and maybe this was something that was different about him now, after the war. He drank a lot of beer now" (20). Thus this newfound dependence on alcohol is depicted as a way of self-medication and an underlying effect of combat trauma in *Ceremony*.

Alternatively, other resulting forms of addictive behavior and mental issues displayed as a result of “battle fatigue” include significant indulgence in "swinging" or having multiple sexual partners and other outbursts of irrational dangerous behavior. Additionally, these women are often prostitutes, engaging in survival sex, equally in as much of a desperate or diminished state as the veterans. The abuse and exploitation of these scandalous women by Indigenous veterans is done in part to heal their mental demons. This unhindered lustful behavior is exceptionally rampant among the Indigenous veteran community to such an immense extent that many veterans often end up courting the same women. To this point, Silko displays such detestable mannerisms with a heavily intoxicated Native veterans speech regarding his lost true love, not aware of the notion that his fellow soldiers courted the same women he holds dear, citing, "She told that to all the guys. Doreen. That's what she called herself. Sure she liked Indians! Because they were dumb guys just like you" (164). These instances of indulgence in "swinging" often lead to outlandish conflict with fellow Indigenous veterans or even the women themselves. Additionally, these incidents and false narratives help fuel a more prominent stereotype of the "drunk violent Indian". Likewise, Silko displays an example of this trope, showcasing Indigenous veterans intoxicated with violent behavior stemming from lustful emotions, remarking, "They beat her up- took turns holding her and hitting her. They yelled at her because they both wanted her; they had been buddies all through the war together, and she was trying to split them up they said" (161). These intrusive designations characterize the narrative surrounding Native Americans purported by racial polarization and an oppressive U.S Culture in *Ceremony*.

On the contrary, these drunken and violent labels or effects were not always the standards set around Native American conduct, especially that of an Indigenous veteran. Correspondingly, the beginning and initial victory of the great war saw the societal and cultural standing of the Native American heightened to a tremendous scale. This period of expanded gratitude and societal appreciation is described by Indigenous veterans as the exemplified "good times", to which grief follows at the wallowing of this lost prestige. Furthermore, the origins of this heightened appreciation can be owed to the fact that society held a common adversary in the Axis powers, which allowed society to bypass its past polarizations and prejudices, fully utilizing the entirety of their community and sub-demographics. Though as the war passed and a common scapegoat could be found no more, the Indian population was once again returned to a state of oppression and scrutiny. In this instance, Silko describes the chronology and demise of these purported "good times", stating, "She looked these Laguna guys. They had been treated first class once, with their uniforms. As long as there had been a war and the white people were afraid of the Japs and Hitler. But these Indians got fooled when they thought it would last" (165). Hence, the Indigenous expression of joy at the rise and fall of the "good times", holds itself as a representation of the effects of war in *Ceremony*.

Apart from combat trauma, war additionally breeds Indigenous controversy pertaining to how it is fought, and who bears the conflict's responsibility. In this instance, the Indigenous elders or those more sympathetic towards traditionalism refer to World War 2 as the "white peoples war", giving the conflict a sense of unfamiliarity to which the Natives bear no obligation. For instance, Ku'oosh speaks about the conflict employing this unfamiliar language,

stating, "'You were with the others' he said, 'the ones who went to the white people's war'" (36). In addition, modern warfare or 'white warfare' generates Native controversy in how it is combatted, differing from the old way of war in which, "You couldn't kill another human without knowing it, without seeing the result" (36). These old Indigenous military methods contrast with the implementation of such new technology as artillery which holds the possibility to wreak massive devastation at enormous distances. Correspondingly, the unforeseen tremendous destructive capabilities of this new weaponry had rendered entirely unbelievable to the Indigenous elders, with Tayo inciting, "But the old man would not have believed white warfare killing across great distances without knowing who or how many had died. It was also too alien to comprehend, the mortars and big guns; and even if he could have taken the old man to see the target areas, even if he could have led him through the fallen jungle trees and muddy craters of torn earth to show him the dead, the old man would not have believed anything so monstrous" (37). Thus confusion and disbelief surrounding conflict and its bearer of responsibility are lingering effects of war in Native American culture in *Ceremony*.

The alteration of cultural values and traditions are prevalent effects of war in *Ceremony*. Likewise, the grim demands of military service often require Indigenous individuals to abandon their possible 'pacifist' values originating from their culture. A prime example of this contentious disobedience would be Tayo refusing an order to execute Japanese prisoners, rather becoming overwhelmed with anxiety and envisioning an old distant Laguna man in Josiah, as Silko cites, "When the sergeant told them to kill all the Japanese soldiers lined up in front of the cave with their hands on their heads, Tayo could not pull the trigger. The fever made him shiver,



and the sweat was stinging his eyes and he couldn't see clearly; in that instant he saw Josiah standing there; the face was dark from the sun, and the eyes were squinting as though he were about to smile at Tayo" (7). These pacifist values embody Tayo's mannerism built around his Native traditions, which reflect heavily on his and many other Indigenous veterans' ability to perform dreadful tasks in their service, as displayed in *Ceremony*.

However, the horrors and execution of war pertain differently to each Native Individual, with some fully assimilating to the violent lifestyle, or even glorifying it. For example, Emo fully immerses himself in the savage culture and identity of the war, even celebrating it by collecting war trophies from his past dispatches. In this notion, Silko illustrates Emo's brutal war identity and vicious mannerism, stating, "Emo fed off each man he killed, and the higher the rank of the dead man, the higher it made Emo" (61), moreover Emo depicts his collection of ritualist war effigies or souvenirs, remarking, "I only went after the officers. These teeth, they were from a Jap colonel. Yeah" (61). Regardless, even though the effects of war on Native American culture differ heavily by the individual, the consequences of these conflicts implement substantial transformation to communities and their cultures.

As previously mentioned, global conflict brings considerable change to various cultures and their traditions. In *Ceremony*, Silko portrays the deeply regarded Indigenous traditions as having been heavily affected or even invalidated by the events and influence of mass combat. In this notion, Tayo expresses massive criticism of the efficiency of traditional Native healing ceremonies with the implication of modern combat, stating, "I wonder what good Indian ceremonies can do against the sickness which comes from their war, their bombs, their lies"

(132). Correspondingly, the origins of the "sickness" are deduced to witchery, with Silko citing, "That is the trickery of the witchcraft" (132). Likewise, this new gruesome standard of combat brings physical and mental wounds so severe that Tayo infers that not even traditional Indigenous medicine has the healing potential to mend such injuries. Nonetheless, although the source of this incurrence is that of Indigenous debate, a similarity in the transformation or culturally manipulative effects of global conflict holds true, which allows for such respected ancient Native traditions as healing ceremonies to become invalidated.

International conflicts and violence are cataclysmic events that shape the future conditions of society. In *Ceremony*, Silko illustrates the effects of war on the Native individual and their culture, alluding to such consequences as mental trauma, alcoholism, engaging in swinger activities, erratic violent behavior, and the modification of culture and tradition. In this illustration, Silko gives a grim but accurate depiction of the horrific treatment of Native American veterans by the Country they served. Thus this begs the question, how does a minoritized demographic that has sacrificed so immensely receive little to no benefit or compensation?

Works Cited

Silko, Leslie M. *Ceremony*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1977. Print.